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ABSTRACT

The information in this document deals with the steps encountered when a school district identifies problems and attempts to change a policy or policies to solve the problem. It deals with the need for a written policy, the involvement of all concerned, implementation of the policy, updating and recodifying existing policies, and dissemination of information. It offers suggestions in the areas of policy adoption, policy reviews, practical payoffs, and planning for the unexpected. (Author/IRT)

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The Pennsylvania Executive Academy

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No. 2

DEVELOPING SCHOOL POLICIES

2

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INTRODUCTION

This is the second in a series of monographs designed to help superintendents and their executive teams solve school district problems. Generally, this monograph will deal with the task of developing school district policy. The information will address itself to the WHAT, WHY, WHO, WHEN and HOW of accomplishing the task. Cost factors will be considered where feasible.

Specifically, the information in this monograph deals with the steps encountered when a school district identifies problems and attempts to change a policy or policies to solve the problems. It will deal with a need for a written policy, the involvement of all concerned, implementation of the policy, updating and recodifying existing policies, and dissemination of information. It will offer suggestions in the areas of policy adoption, policy review, practical pay-offs and planning for the unexpected.

In summary, the suggested steps deal with the function and authority of the school board, the administration, the staff and the community in the development of policies for the school district.

Hopefully, the monograph contains enough information and hints to help the management team and school directors write a practical, usable policy manual.

DEVELOPING SCHOOL POLICIES

Need for a Written Policy

Although need for a written policy manual may be somewhat obvious, many school districts operate without the benefit of specific written guidelines. They appear to operate as smoothly as districts with policies. Why then is there a need for a written policy?

The National School Boards Association supports the need for a written policy because it feels a policy helps a school district operate more smoothy. It states:

> School board members are only human. Unless they impose order and discipline on the way they arrive, they can or do get into trouble.[1]

Furthermore, a set of well-defined policies cuts down the likelihood of trouble and eliminates such common malpractices as:

1. Instant policymaking. That happens when the school board makes a decision too hastily, without benefit of research, study, cool deliberation, due notice or professional opinion.

2. Dictatorial policymaking. That happens when the school board makes policy unilaterally, without seeking the counsel or advice of those who are to be affected.

3. Illegal policymaking. That happens when the board fails to consult its attorney on matters where case law is still being written.

4. Sloppy policymaking. That happens when the board fails to assign the drafting of policy statements to a competent writer.

5. Contradictory policymaking. That happens when the board has no mechanism (such as a codification system) for the immediate retrieval of all past policy decisions which exist only as historical items buried in the book of minutes.[2]

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[1] Board Policies on Policy Development, Educational Policies Development Kit, National School Boards Association, Waterford, Connecticut, June, 1972, p.3.

[2] IBID.

Aside from eliminating the malpractices mentioned above, a well-defined and written set of school board policies serves a public relations and guidance function as well. This is pointed out through a review of a portion of the "Method of Operation" section of the policies of the Pasadena Independent School District, Pasadena, Texas which states:

> A statement of written policy has many values. Its most important value lies in the guidance which it provides for the school staff, the administration and the board itself. The policy handbook will also acquaint interested citizens of the community with the policies, rules and regulations of the business which they support financially...[3]

A further argument for the need for written policies was advanced by Dickson when he stated:

> Up-to-date and responsive written policies provide tangible evidence that school boards can indeed govern. Written policies are the chief means by which the school board governs the schools; administrative rules are one of the means by which the superintendent implements the board's policies.[4]

There is further written evidence to uphold the need for written policies but it should suffice to state that written school board policies are necessary for efficient management, clarification of procedures and public involvement in, and understanding of, school district actions.

Involvement in Writing Policy

Most people who talk about developing and writing school board policies refer to two main groups--the school board and the professional staff. Obviously, these two groups are important and necessary to

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[3] Updating School Board Policies-V, Croft Leadership Action Folio 79, Croft Publications, Waterford, Connecticut, p. 4.

[4] William E. Dickson, "The Process of Developing Written School Board Policies," Paper presented at the annual convention of the National School Boards Association, April 20, 1975, 20 p.

the development of school district policies. However, in order to arrive at a policy handbook that is feasible, acceptable and workable for a school district, one must necessarily involve all interested and affected individuals and groups. In reference to involvement in writing a policy, the Regional High School District 5, Woodbridge, Connecticut, makes the following commitment:

> It shall be the policy of the Board to encourage employee participation in policymaking for the school district. The Superintendent is authorized to establish such committees as necessary to recommend policies for the proper functioning of the district.
>
> All professional personnel shall be encouraged to assist in the formulation of recommended educational policy for the district through their representatives on the District Steering Committee...[5]

Further argument for community involvement in policy development is stated by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools, Charlotte, N.C.:

> A lay policy advisory committee shall be appointed by the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board to serve at the Board's discretion as a general study group to concern itself with basic areas of systemwide policy...[6]

Another group that should be considered in the development of a school district policy handbook is the student body. The Gardner Public Schools, Gardner, Massachusetts, recognizes this important factor with this statement:

> Most students desire a stronger voice in the decisions that affect them, and their efforts are welcomed by the school committee. The school committee views student participation in school affairs as an extension of the educational process.[7]

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[5] Updating School Board Policies-V, op. cit., p. 16.
[6] Ibid., p. 17.
[7] Ibid., p. 18.

In summary, it becomes apparent that good school district procedure with respect to policy development must involve groups other than the school board and the central administrative staff. At the very least, the development of policy should involve the professional teaching staff, the students and the community.

An important fact to keep in mind is that involvement enhances communication. Community members, students and teachers may not agree with everything that is finally included in a policy guideline, but they are more likely to accept it if they have been involved in the discussions and development. In working with the community, it may be helpful to refer to the Pennsylvania Executive Academy's Monograph Series No. 1 entitled Community Involvement and the Activity 4 booklet entitled Implementation Outline for Community Involvement.

General Steps in Policy Development

As a need for written policies becomes apparent, the school district must decide what steps must be taken to initiate, develop, write, examine and codify school district policies. The following list can serve as a general guide to what the school board should do to develop a policy manual or revise an existing manual:

1. Examine and assess goals - set new goals and revise old goals.
2. Conduct an assessment to determine which goals are acceptable to varying audiences such as the community, school board, instructional staff, students and administrators.
3. Identify gaps (needs) in the policy guidelines.
4. Arrange policy needs in general categories or identify them according to their relationship to groups.
5. Place policy needs in a priority arrangement.
6. Identify group(s) to work on specific policy development.

7. Determine the cost of instituting or implementing each policy.

8. Modify policies in light of concerns, if necessary.

9. Submit each policy to all groups concerned for review and critique.

10. Codify all policies.

11. Review, critique, revise and adopt policies.

12. Print policies.

13. Put in a policy handbook.

Policy Review

A school district should be flexible and willing to constantly review and update its existing written policies. Policies may become unworkable or obsolete as a result of legislative changes, federal or state mandates, contract negotiations, community pressures, student needs, court decisions, etc.

As the board reviews and considers the revision of old policies or the adoption of new policies, it should also encourage and consider both formal and informal reports from the community and the district instructional and noninstructional staff.

Policy items should be submitted for review or revision on the school board meeting agenda by the administrative staff or by an individual board member or group of board members. Before any policy change, the board should thoroughly study ways in which policies have been carried out and the impact they have made on the school system.

Policy Adoption

The adoption of a policy or policies should not be hurried. The adoption procedure is as important as the development phase in terms of acceptance by the entire educational community. Except for emergency

situations, the adoption of a policy should follow a set sequential pattern. The Educational Policies Service of the National School Boards Association suggests the following adoption procedure:[8]

Phase 1

1. Announcement and distribution of proposed new or revised policies as an item of information.

2. Opportunity offered to concerned groups or individuals to react to policy proposals.

3. Discussion and final action by the board on policy proposals.

Phase 2 (The final vote to adopt or not to adopt a policy)

1. All policy proposals should be titled and coded.

2. Each policy statement should be limited to one subject.

3. Policies and amendments should be attached to and made part of the minutes of the meeting at which they are adopted.

4. Policies and amendments should be included in the policy manual of the district.

5. Policies and amendments should become effective immediately upon adoption unless a specific effective date is established.

Practical Pay-offs

Why develop policies? Why go to the trouble of codifying them? Why get involved in the financial obligation of implementation? Why risk criticism from community and staff. The answer is simple. There are certain very valuable practical pay-offs associated with the development and implementation of policies. These pay-offs include:

1. Written policies foster stability and continuity in a school district.

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[8]Policy Adoption an EPS/NSBA Policy Idea, National School Boards Association, Waterford, Connecticut, p. 1.

2. Written policies keep people informed about the board's goals and its position on major education and operational problems.

3. Written policies clarify board-superintendent relations.

4. Written policies save time and effort for the superintendent.

5. Written policies save time and effort for the board.[9]

6. Written policies insure the involvement of individuals and groups in the development process.

7. Written policies aid in decisions to expend funds and assist in preventing erroneous or illegal expenditures.

8. Written policies insure that all state and federal guidelines, regulations and laws are being met.

9. Written policies insure that staff, student and community interests and needs are being considered.

10. Written policies establish parameters of operation for instructional staff, noninstructional staff and students.

11. Written policies provide for due process in a district.

Policy Handbook Format

A policy handbook should clarify school district policies for both the instructional and noninstructional staff, the students, the administration and the community. It is imperative that certain considerations be taken into account in order to produce a coherent usable document. The following are suggestions for developing and writing a policy handbook:

1. The policy handbook should be codified and policies should be grouped under certain general categories.

2. The pagination should be structured so that a policy may be revised, rewritten, added or deleted without disrupting the entire handbook numbering system.

3. Each policy should be written separately on one or more pages and should not be printed on pages containing another policy.

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[9]Ben Brodinsky, "The School Board Member's Guide to Policy Development," Educational Policies Service, National School Boards Association, State National Bank Plaza, Evanston, Illinois, p. 4.

4. A policy handbook should be of loose-leaf design and with a three-ring binder so pages or dividers can be easily added or removed.

5. Each written policy should contain, but not be limited to, the following information:

   a. A rationale for the particular policy. A short paragraph should explain the problem or situation mandating a written policy.

   b. The actual policy statement explaining the intent to eliminate the situation or concern stated in the rationale.

   c. A statement of general procedures if procedural steps are implied to implement the policy. (The general procedures may be further refined in the actual implementation.)

   d. A listing of all local, state and federal laws, regulations, standards or mandates that apply to the policy being considered for adoption.

   e. An adoption date and, if desirable, the vote as it was cast for adoption (Adopted: 10/12/76; Vote: Yes 9 - No).

A district may want to include more information for each policy statement. However, those maintained are adequate and acceptable.

Estimated Costs

Obviously, costs to develop and implement a school district policy handbook will differ according to the size and complexity of the handbook, the size of the school district, the cost of implementing specific policies, the typing and duplicating costs, staff usage and consultant costs.

The following considerations are basic to estimating the costs of a completed policy handbook:

1. Staff - Staff may be local members of the school district, an outside consultant or both. A district should figure on 20 per cent of a part-time director's time and an assistant full-time until the project is completed.

2. Materials - This category includes office space, an electric typewriter, file cabinet, reams of paper, file folders, notebooks and binders, etc. The cost of these materials can be listed and accurately budgeted.

3. Distribution - Depending on the scope and type of distribution, costs can be estimated accurately.

4. Duplication - Duplication and photocopying costs can be accurately assessed as each policy or section is prepared for inclusion in the final document.

5. Implementation- Although difficult, this phase of the project can be generally assessed. Implementation may involve numerous hidden costs that are extremely difficult to estimate, such as time factors, indirect costs and effects in other areas. However, it is advisable for a district to attempt to estimate the cost of implementing policies.

Summary

From the proceeding information, it is obvious that a policy handbook is a definite advantage to a school district and serves many purposes other than just stating and codifying the operation of the district. A well-developed, intelligently implemented policy handbook provides practical positive pay off in terms of stability, communication, continuity of procedures, staff and community acceptance and, finally, stated rules and regulations that assure an educational environment to enhance teaching and learning in the classroom. It also provides written guidelines for all noninstructional staff of a school district. In short, a well conceived policy handbook establishes the parameters for a successful educational operation.

The cost of developing and implementing a workable policy handbook includes both direct and indirect costs; and the district should be aware of the two and be willing to underwrite them in order to develop a finished product.

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